

PROVIDENCE AND HISTORIES: SOME AMERICAN VIEWS

A. PROVIDENCE AND RESPONSIBILITY: RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS' VIEWS

I am pleased to be on the panel which opens this conference of the Catholic Theological Society of America. The topic is one dear to my heart. I am a Sister of Providence and have been one for 38 years. Tonight I represent 11 congregations of Providence who come from many nations and who had no particular ties with one another until 1980 when Sister Michele Holland, a Sister of Providence of Great Falls, Montana, called us together in order to begin a dialogue on the topic, providence.

What we realized in 1980 was that though we proudly bore the name Providence, most of us could not have stated a theological paragraph about it. All of us believed in providence; all of us honored providence. We recognized the need for a theology of providence which would speak to the women and men of our time about a name of God so singularly appropriate to a historical moment in which the chaotic and the irrational seem to prevail.

At the 1980 meeting in Great Falls, we told about our congregations and the history of our Sisters' choices of the name providence. We began the investigation of why we were named providence and why our founders had not chosen a different title. Many of us had originally been called Sisters of Charity of Providence. Through the years the people among whom we worked began to call us simply Sisters of Providence. That was the name that stuck with most of our groups.

In 1982 we held our first Symposium on Providence at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College, Terre Haute, Indiana, a college founded by Sisters of Providence in 1840. At the end of that meeting, the superiors of the Congregations determined that we should continue our connections with one another and established a steering committee to work toward a theology of providence applicable to the needs, the prayer and the life of ordinary women and men.

The committee planned a colloquium on providence for 1984 at the Sisters of Providence Motherhouse in Allison Park, Pennsylvania. Drs. Langdon Gilkey and James Wright, S.J., were present to our early dialogues. We selected women from our various congregations to present papers and we designed a specific process to guide the conversations. We published the papers in our book: *Providence: God's Face towards the World*.

In 1986 we named retreat teams who traveled to six locations across the United States and Canada to give a retreat on providence to any women and men interested in the topic. The teams met groups in Westfield, Massachusetts, Baltimore,

Maryland, Melbourne, Kentucky, St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana, Edmonton, Alberta and San Antonio, Texas. Our theology of providence was being carried across the nations. In September of 1987, Carroll Stuhlmueller and I gave a retreat on providence at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College. This retreat was taped and the tapes called "Providence" are available through Paulist Press.

During the meeting of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in 1985, Superiors of the Congregations of Providence were unanimous in their choice that we continue what we had begun. There had already been a renewal of interest and love, and certainly a far more profound understanding of a theology of providence. We know the need to find proper expressions of the meaning of providence because we are certain that this name of God gives hope to the believing community, particularly when governance of the universe seems random.

In June of 1987, 350 delegates from 15 nations and multiple languages convened at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College for an International Providence Symposium. In addition to the papers that were delivered by Thea Bowman, Carroll Stuhlmueller, Patricia Mische, and me, the group participated in small workshops which dealt with providence topics (e.g., Providence and Philosophy; Providence and Feminism; Providence and Creativity; Providence and the Black Experience). A true bond in providence has begun to unite the congregations. The steering committee is presently planning a second colloquium and are present here to listen and to determine how your work corresponds with ours. We are preparing to publish a book of reflections and art work about providence. We may print a directory offering our women the possibility of working in providence missions across the world so they may see how the mission of providence is carried out in various nations and with various peoples.

We feel that what we have accomplished since 1980 is to publish, speak and pray a theology of providence that has become increasingly useful and near at hand to the people of our times. We have suggested that a theology of providence has four important areas which in any dialogue about providence must be taken into consideration. These are:

- (1) God's design and governance of the universe over against human feelings of disorder and chaos
- (2) God's providential care and the human experience of care and noncare
- (3) God's plan and human freedom/abandonment/surrender
- (4) God's providence and human foresight, creativity and participation.

The most fruitful insight which we have derived from our work and our prayer is that the providence of God must be seen to encompass both the rational and the irrational of human existence. Humanity is not deprived of providence in the moments in which we experience chaos, disorder and noncare. The book *Chaos* by James Gleick, from the vantage point of a journalist interested in science, corroborated our notion that chaos is a normal part of order and that there is an order even in the chaotic itself. Our work is important in the church since design is so often disrupted by the formless and since governance seems to give way to lawlessness in many parts of the world. We have defined providence, therefore, as that name of God which brings the polarities of human existence into meaning. We have identified the polarities of design/chaos, care/noncare, plan/disruption, etc. as pertinent to the topic, providence. We humans need to establish meaning among

all of our experiences. It is this name of God, providence, which enables us to do just that since providence encompasses and undergirds all of reality, not just the parts of reality which seem to us to be ordered. It is from the theology of the cross derived from Jurgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino that this understanding of providence can be gained. In the disorder of the cross of Jesus Christ lay a profound revelation of the nature of God. In the disorder of our times lies hidden the providence of God allowing us always to comprehend, if not at once—at least in hindsight—the redemptive meaning of our human experiences.

Ministers of Providence are precisely those women and men who offer meaning and who can speak meaning. This definition connotes an ability to interpret the present to the community so that the community can move into its future with an assurance and confirmation of meaning.

I am privileged to be a part of this conference. I bring you the wit and the wisdom that our 11 congregations have gathered since 1980. We intend to continue our work and we are pleased to be associated with all of you who ponder the mystery of providence in your own theologizing. I hope during the days of this conference that I will have an opportunity to speak to many of you personally and to elicit your help as we move into the future.

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